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Ghosts of SALT I Hover over Capital

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WASHINGTON — By declaring the achievement of a new SALT agreement to be the most urgent objective of his foreign policy, President Carter has closely tied his prestige to the fate of the nearly completed treaty.

An expected signing at the summit with Brezhnev in January will commit him to an uphill fight for ratification in the Senate. Whether he can win will depend to some extent on his ability to avoid the end game moves that turned Richard Nixon's SALT I triumph in 1972 into a pyrrhic victory for the U.S.

A timely reminder of the dangers of down-to-the-wire negotiations with the Russians is contained in an article to appear in "Strategic Review" by David Sullivan, an ex-CIA analyst. In the final stages of the SALT I negotiations, the Soviets used artful deception and ruthless bargaining to extract the last ounce of advantage from a president straining to reach an early agreement for domestic political reasons.

In retrospect, it is clear that the American side was duped on the crucial issue of the number of "heavy" ICBMs to be allowed the Russians. By refusing to include a specific definition of the size of a heavy missile in the agreement, the Soviets were later able to replace their light missiles with their new SS-19, which carries as big a payload as our heaviest ICBM.

Failing to get Russian agreement on a definition, the American negotiators issued a unilateral statement on what the U.S. conceived a heavy missile to be. Not legally bound by this declaration, the Soviets proceeded after SALT I was signed to test their SS-19 which they had developed in utmost secrecy. Deployed now in growing numbers, this missile with its six accurate warheads dangerously increases the vulnerability of the U.S. land-based ICBMs.

The Soviets did not actually cheat. Instead, by insistence on deliberately ambiguous language and by concealing the development of their new missile, they won a crucial advantage that SALT II does nothing to repair.

In the case of missiles launched from submarines, the Soviets obtained a 3-2 numerical advantage in SALT I by claiming that their lack of forward bases did not permit them to maintain as many of their subs at sea. They kept secret their development of a 4,000-mile, submarine-launched missile. When later unveiled, the range of this weapon made nonsense of the argument that they lacked forward bases.

Also in SALT I the Soviets refused to accept an American proposed ban on the deployment of mobile ICBMs. Instead, Brezhnev offered Nixon verbal assurances that he did not plan to deploy such weapons. We now know that the Soviets have since produced an undetermined number of mobile ICBMs. Kept under cover, they could be rolled into firing position in a time of crisis.

The Carter administration can both learn from and will be judged by this bitter SALT I experience, as it faces the final stages of the SALT II negotiations. The basic lessons seem clear.

The limitations on strategic weaponry in a SALT II treaty must be spelled out in specific and unambiguous detail. The Soviets have proved their ability to drive huge ICBMs through any remaining loophole. Unilateral American statements of what we think the treaty means are worthless and will be ignored by the Soviets.

Unverifiable promises to exercise restraint by the Soviets cannot be relied upon. This cautionary warning applies

particularly to any promise by the Soviets to limit the threat of their Backfire bomber by not deploying it in Arctic bases.

The secret development of more efficient strategic weapons by the Soviets must be assumed, and the controls adopted must anticipate and limit qualitative improvement.

The Soviets will predictably build up their weaponry to the outermost limits of what the treaty allows and exploit every ambiguity. The only protection for the U.S. is to match this buildup and not to assume naively that a SALT agreement signals an end to the arms race.

In the cold light of this SALT I experience, Carter is risking his political influence at home and his prestige abroad on the chancy outcome of the Senate ratification debate. Opposition is already so strong that he cannot afford any more concessions to the Soviets in the end game that has begun.

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